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U.S. Nonproliferation Efforts Continue as Nuclear Material is Removed from Bulgaria

Fresh HEU Nuclear Fuel Repatriated to the Russian Federation

WASHINGTON, D.C. -- Seventeen kilograms of Russian-origin highly enriched uranium (HEU) were returned from Bulgaria to the Russian Federation yesterday, U.S. Secretary of Energy Spencer Abraham announced today. It was one of a string of successful efforts by the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE)-funded Russian Research Reactor Fuel Return Initiative. The fresh HEU was airlifted from Gorna Oryahovista airport in Bulgaria to Dmitrovgrad, Russia where it will be down-blended.

“The Bush Administration has taken the lead on nonproliferation efforts to help make our world safer,” Secretary Abraham said. “With U.S. leadership and through cooperation and determination with other nations, a more secure world is eventually attainable. Proliferation of nuclear material is a worldwide problem and requires a worldwide solution. We must not allow terrorists and others with bad intentions to acquire deadly material and the Department of Energy will continue doing its part.”

The highly enriched nuclear fuel assemblies were originally supplied to Bulgaria by the former Soviet Union for the Russian-designed two megawatt research reactor, located in Sofia. The reactor was shutdown in 1989, and is going to be reconstructed. The nuclear fuel was loaded into four fresh fuel transportation canisters provided by the Russian Federation. International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards inspectors and DOE technical experts monitored the process of loading the fuel in the canisters. An AN-12 Russian cargo plane was used to complete the air shipment of the HEU fuel from Bulgaria.

The shipment of the research reactor fuel from Bulgaria to Russia was part of a U.S.-led cooperative international effort to reduce, and if possible eliminate, the use and storage of high enriched uranium in civil nuclear activities.

“The Bulgarians have shown leadership as they have cooperated with the U.S., Russia, and the IAEA in seeking ways to reduce the threat of nuclear proliferation, including the return of HEU from Bulgaria to Russia,” National Nuclear Security Administration Administrator Linton Brooks said. “Along with the decision to return fresh HEU to Russia, the Bulgarian government also has made a decision to reconstruct the existing research reactor in Sofia to low enriched uranium fuel. These are important steps in our overall nonproliferation efforts worldwide.”

R-03-292

(MORE)

- 2 -

The shipment of HEU from Bulgaria is the third shipment conducted under a tripartite initiative (the United States, the Russian Federation, and the IAEA) to return Russian-supplied HEU research reactor fuel for long-term management and disposition. The first shipment of fresh Russian-origin HEU fuel from then-Yugoslavia to the Russian Federation occurred in August 2002. The second shipment from Romania was carried out on September 21, 2003.

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